



Aging in Place

***Housing Adaptations
and Options for
Remaining in the
Community***

Chapter 10

The Federal Government's Role in Housing Elderly Canadians

by Sylvia Goldblatt, 1986

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Gutman**

and

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**GERONTOLOGY RESEARCH
CENTRE
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Housing Adaptations and Options for Remaining in the Community

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FOREWORD

The papers in this volume derive from two symposia held in conjunction with the 14th Annual Meeting of the Canadian Association on Gerontology/Association canadienne de gérontologie (CAG/Acg) held in Hamilton, Ontario, October 17-20, 1985. The first, which bore the title of this volume and from which the majority of papers derive, was organized by the editors, Gloria Gutman and Norman Blackie and was co-sponsored by CAG/Acg and the Simon Fraser University Gerontology Research Centre. The second symposium, entitled "A Comparative Analysis of Provincial Housing Policies for the Elderly Living in the Community" was organized by Martin Wexler. Papers from the two symposia have been combined because together they present an overview of the broad variety of housing options and support service programs, both governmental and non-governmental, available to Canadian seniors who wish to remain in the community.

It should be noted that this volume builds on two previous joint publications of the CAG/Acg and the Simon Fraser University Gerontology Research Centre. One, by Statistic Canada's Gordon Priest (1985), entitled "Living Arrangements of Canada's Elderly: Changing Demographic and Economic Factors", examines the current housing characteristics and living arrangements of elderly Canadians with a view to identifying the scenarios which are likely to unfold in the future. The second, "Innovations in Housing and Living Arrangements for Seniors" (Gutman and Blackie, 1985), describes the process involved in developing new units under cooperative and non-profit sponsorship, barrier free and prosthetic design issues, innovative financial solutions such as home equity conversion plans as well as several physical solutions (e.g., shared housing; retirement communities) not covered in this volume.

Publication of the two earlier volumes as well as this volume was supported in part by grants from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation whose financial assistance we gratefully acknowledge. We are indebted to the authors whose works appear here for so ably addressing the topics that were assigned to them. We thank Martin Wexler for taking the initiative in organizing the symposium concerned with provincial housing programs and policies. We also wish to thank Donna Popovic, SFU Gerontology Research Centre Secretary, for typing the manuscript and Belle Bojanowski, Centre Information Officer, for assisting with the production of the book.

Gloria M. Gutman, Ph.D.
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July, 1986

10 THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S ROLE IN HOUSING ELDERLY CANADIANS

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This paper provides an historical picture of the Government's role in the provision of senior citizens housing. It may come as a surprise to some readers to learn that Canada was the last of the western industrialized nations to adopt subsidized public housing as a national measure. Federal housing legislation went on the books as early as 1938 to provide aid to provinces and municipalities which were prepared to take the initiative and build accommodation for those who could not afford housing at market prices. It took almost 30 years for public housing on a meaningful scale to become a reality (Goldblatt, 1965). In the period 1950-1960, Canada built 7,500 public housing units out of a total of one quarter million housing units built in that period. Ontario was the centre of the action.

The National Housing Act (NHA) of 1944 is an enlightened piece of social legislation. The amendments passed in 1954 and 1964 attempted to add flexibility to the Act so that governments at all three levels could become involved.

Ontario passed Bill 135 on 24 April 1964. This was, in effect, an instrument to create the Ontario Housing Corporation (OHC). In a booklet put out at the time outlining the structure and functions of the OHC, it is described as "a single agency responsible for all aspects of housing in Ontario" (Government of Ontario, n.d.). The forms of accommodation which it could provide included: family, senior citizens, hostel accommodation for single persons, and accommodation for other special groups. The booklet points out that the capital cost of all housing developed by OHC would be financed by the federal and provincial governments. In order to retain the local interest vital to any housing program, the municipality would be asked to pay 7.5% of any operating losses incurred, except for senior citizens housing. The municipality would be asked to waive all realty taxes in excess of \$25 per suite per annum for senior citizens housing. When other provinces in Canada entered the housing field they adapted the Ontario legislation to meet their financial resources. For example, Ontario and British Columbia took advantage of the 1964 NHA amendments which permitted provincial governments to borrow 90% of the capital cost of public housing from the federal government and cost share losses 50-50. The housing was exclusively owned by the province. Other provinces chose to stay with earlier legislation and remain a part owner, with the federal government owning 75% and the province 25%. Losses were shared on the same ratio. To complicate the picture Alberta and Quebec made their own deals.

The National Housing Act has been amended many times in response to social and economic changes in the country. However, a common theme has been present over the years. In a 1982 publication called *CMHC and the National Housing Act*, two general objectives are identified for the NHA: "to assist the private market in producing enough affordable housing to meet the

needs of most Canadians and to provide assistance for people whose needs cannot be met through the private market" (p. 3).

Thirty years and some 200,000 units later, the Public Housing Program was essentially discontinued in 1979. It should be noted, however, that approximately one half of the units built under this program were designated for senior citizens.

These designated units are for one and two-person occupancy. They may be of the following type: elevator high-rise or low-rise, one-storey row houses, or two storey walkups. Public housing for seniors has been built right across the country. Many projects have design features that make them more convenient for an older person: the kitchen cupboards are lower to make it easier to reach the shelves; electric outlets are placed higher on the wall to avoid having to reach down to the floor; in the bathroom, grab bars are installed by the toilet and bathtub; slip-resistant floors and low-piled carpeting is used. The buildings are provided with social and recreation space to encourage tenants to socialize and share activities.

A key factor in the successful use of this space is the attitude of the Housing Authority and the management style it imposes on the residents: Along with the province, it is the local municipality that carries a large share of this responsibility. Once the housing is occupied the federal government has no contact with the tenants.

Some municipalities send public health nurses to check on the health of the tenants; some send staff from their recreation department to bring leadership and skills that stimulate activity. Some buildings are provided with a resident superintendent who constitutes an important link both with management and with community services. If this person enjoys working with older people and is a helpful type, he/she can make a great difference to the quality of life in the complex. It will be recalled that the importance of good management was among the key findings that emerged from the "Beyond Shelter" study of NHA-financed housing for the elderly (Audain et al., 1973).

The Public Housing program was expensive for the public purse. Public Housing also had to fight negativism centered around the fact that by its nature it brought to a single site people who had financial difficulties. This created, in the case of family housing more than senior citizens housing, pressure on local governments to deal with the need for services. High visibility was given to the need for marriage counselling, child rearing assistance, mental health clinics, recreation facilities and school teachers with the skill to handle children who were coping with serious problems at home. Without this assistance some of the public housing projects became less than desirable places to live. The public was unfriendly toward the program, worried that if it was built in their

neighbourhood it would devalue the homes they owned. It should also be noted that while senior citizens public housing was more warmly received by the community, the apartment buildings for seniors that were built as part of a family complex were not always well received by elderly people themselves.

SECTION 56.1

The Public Housing Program was replaced by a Social Housing Program that is sometimes referred to as 56.1, which is the section of the National Housing Act that describes its parameters. This program addresses the problem of segregating the poor by assigning only a portion of the units in any project to rent-to-income tenants. The balance is rented to people who can afford low-end of market rents. The overall price of the units is controlled by a Maximum Unit Price (MUPS) that is established by CMHC for each area of the country. This ensures that the size of the unit is kept to a modest scale. Everyone who moves in receives a subsidy towards their rent because they are benefitting from the write-down in the mortgage interest rate to 2%. A designated number of the residents who have financial problems get further assistance by having their rent set at 30% of their income. The rents are set for the majority of tenants at the low end of the market rents for similar accommodation not under rent control. It is the difference between this market rent and the economic rent (meeting mortgage payments and operating costs) that is used to assist the low-income renters.

One type of complex sponsored under this program may have a central dining room service where the evening meal is built into the rental structure. Everyone has a small kitchen in their own apartment for preparing their other meals.

Developments built under Section 56.1 are referred to as private non-profit projects if the sponsor is a church group, ethnic group or service organization. Housing can, however, also be sponsored by public non-profit organizations, such as a province or more usually, a city. The latter would use the program to provide housing for families and seniors - usually in separate buildings. Their senior housing is likely to consist mainly of one-bedroom units, have a few two-bedroom units but no provision for a meal service.

Co-operative housing for seniors, also eligible for funding under Section 56.1 as a not for profit sponsor, is similar to the city's product in that it is unlikely to include meal service and the apartments would be one and two bedroom units. For those who prefer to have more control of their environment, to carry some responsibility, and to contribute to the success of the project, the management of co-operatives is structured to encourage participation. In a co-op the share holders or residents are in total control of the

housing. They incorporate as a non-profit co-op with a legal charter and they control the management of the complex. They must build according to the local maximum unit prices but within that price they can make decisions that express their own preferences. They choose their own management style and decide what tasks can be carried out by the members in order to save on monthly charges. Everyone pays an initial fee of around five hundred dollars to purchase their share. This is refundable when they leave the co-op. To date, the turnover has been very light and co-ops have proved to be a viable alternative for consumers who are seeking modest housing that offers an alternative to home ownership.

To the extent that the co-op members choose to create a network of mutual support between neighbours the opportunity is there. This is illustrated in a film called "The Battle of Beech Hall" which describes a group that acquired some existing housing and turned it into a co-op.¹ Under the 56.1 program a sponsor can acquire and upgrade an existing building or start with new construction or combine the two.

The 56.1 program also makes it possible for a sponsor to provide hostel accommodation (a bedroom) and a complete range of health, social and recreational facilities but not a hospital facility. In the case of Nursing Homes or Homes for the Aged that are built under the 56.1 program, it is the province that provides the per diem assistance to meet operating costs and the capital cost of the health component in the building. CMHC covers the capital cost of the shelter component.

OTHER PROGRAMS

There is another program called the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP), which is designed to help homeowners upgrade their home with respect to health and safety standards, energy conservation and accessibility for disabled people. Grant money and a loan is available to the owner. There are designated areas of the country where the house must be located in order to be eligible for these grants. However, owners who want to make changes that increase accessibility for disabled persons can receive this assistance wherever they might live.

The CMHC also has the authority under Part V of the National Housing Act to expend funds on housing research, publications and information services. Advisory documents such as *Housing the Elderly* (CMHC, 1975), *Housing the Disabled* (CMHC, 1975) and *Nursing Homes and Hostels with*

¹The Battle of Beech Hall was filmed by Christopher Wilson for the Citizens' Co-op Project. Produced by Cinematic Productions, Toronto, and released in 1982, the film is available from : Audi-Visual Unit, ICOM, CMHC National Office, Montreal Road, Ottawa, Canada, K1A 0P7.

Care Service for the Elderly (CMHC, 1979) are sold. A large number of other publications are available for free distribution.²

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The intent of this paper was to describe the variety of housing alternatives available to older Canadians under the National Housing Act. It is likely that in the years ahead, when the number of older Canadians will increase dramatically, more new ideas will be forthcoming, no doubt, a good number contributed by elderly people themselves.

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²To obtain a list of CMHC publications and an order form, contact your local CMHC office which will provide a copy of the 1985 *CMHC Publications Catalogue* (No. NHA 5006). Reports of research projects funded under CMHC's External Research Grants Program are also available free of charge, from the Canadian Housing Information Centre (CHIC) at the CMHC National Office in Ottawa. The CHIC will send out lists of research projects CMHC has funded so that one can choose to receive the reports of particular interest.